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### **PA Gotbaum, Elected Officials, Advocates: Mayor Bloomberg Must Change Course on Food Stamps**

Decision means New Yorkers and city economy could lose out on roughly \$155 million

MANHATTAN – Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum today stood with elected officials and advocates to call on Mayor Bloomberg to change course on his decision to refuse a provision of the federal stimulus bill that would bring millions of dollars into the city. President Obama's stimulus package includes a provision that suspends the limit on how long able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) can receive Food Stamps—now known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits—while they look for work. The Public Advocate's office estimates, based on available information, that the city could lose roughly \$155 million because of their refusal to accept this provision of the stimulus bill.

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum said, "Food stamps are an essential part of the stimulus because the money ultimately goes to our city's small businesses: grocery stores and bodegas, green markets and vegetable stands. The mayor's message to Washington is clear: When Wall Street executives get billions from the federal government, it should come without restrictions or rules, but poor New Yorkers should have to jump through

unnecessary hoops to get the hundred-plus dollars a month in aid that they're entitled to. This is neither good policy nor compassionate leadership, at a time when we need both."

Comptroller William Thompson said, "As this recession continues to batter our city, New Yorkers from Stapleton to Soundview are watching their neighbors struggle to make ends meet. But instead of taking the necessary steps needed to help those who have been most affected by this downturn, the Mayor has demonstrated his lack of understanding for what New Yorkers are going through. By refusing to implement a temporary expansion of food stamps to help those facing hardship, support neighborhood businesses, and provide economic stimulus to the city and nation, the Mayor has instead chosen to punish victims of the economic downturn based on his personal views."

Councilmember Bill de Blasio said, "The city is using much needed federal food aid as a tool to justify a broken ideology. Hungry New Yorkers should not be required to work without pay just to earn federal food stamps that they are already entitled to. As chair of the General Welfare Committee, I will ask the city to fully explain during upcoming budget hearings how denying hungry New Yorkers food helps them find good jobs."

Councilmember Gioia said, "It's time that we put away the stale old arguments that penalize the poor and place bureaucratic hurdles in the way of federal dollars intended to feed the hungry."

David R. Jones, Esq., president and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York said, "The mayor's refusal to extend food stamps will just add to the everyday misery of life for low-income New Yorkers. Our economy is producing joblessness, rather than jobs - we must put people first, particularly low-income New Yorkers. What is accomplished by denying unemployed New Yorkers food? These are people who already are living on the edge."

**Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger said, "We were thrilled that President Obama's stimulus package includes funding that would allow ABAWDs to continue to receive SNAP benefits while they are searching for work in these difficult economic times. We were therefore astonished by the Mayor's unilateral decision that serves to keep federal dollars out of New York City and to hurt hungry New Yorkers. Some policy decisions are a 'win-win,' but this decision is certainly a 'lose-lose' both for the City and for its low-income residents."**

Doreen Wohl, Executive Director, West Side Campaign Against Hunger said, "Single unemployed people need to eat too. We are committed to providing food to everyone in need, employed and unemployed, single or in families. We provide three days of food, once a month, and assist people finding permanent solutions to income and job insecurity, such as enrollment in SNAP (food stamps), and in health insurance and job training, to help free them permanently from food insecurity. In the current economic crisis and rise in unemployment, we are struggling to keep up with a striking 26% increase in New York households turning to us for food. Extending SNAP beyond three

months to able-bodied unemployed adults without dependents while they look for work is humane and essential.”

The economic recovery bill, signed by President Obama, will allow ABAWDs to continue to receive Food Stamps as they search for employment, suspending the three-month limit for applicants through September 2010. The bill effectively eliminates the need for New York City to accept the waiver. The bill states that state agencies must disregard any period in which an individual received Food Stamp benefits prior to October 1, 2010, meaning ABAWDs will be eligible at that time for an additional three months of benefits within a three-year period.

The Public Advocate has been calling on the Bloomberg administration to accept the ABAWD waiver since taking office in 2002. The stimulus bill would extend benefits to 47,000 ABAWDs currently receiving Food Stamps. In addition, according to published reports, city officials estimated that, in 2006, another 13,900 ABAWDs in New York City would have access to Food Stamps if the three-month limit were waived.

Despite the urging of the Public Advocate and other elected officials and hunger advocates, the Bloomberg administration has never accepted the ABAWD waiver. Now that the stimulus bill eliminates the need to accept the waiver, the Bloomberg administration says it is not obligated to extend Food Stamp benefits to anyone not enrolled in the Work Experience Program, a program that requires benefits recipients to work a minimum of 20 hours a week at unpaid jobs to receive their benefits.

The 1996 federal welfare reform created the ABAWD category, and New York State received a waiver from the US Department of Agriculture to extend the three-month limit for applicants in certain counties with high unemployment rates. Under the Bloomberg administration, New York City, though eligible for exemption, declined the waiver, despite the fact it would cost the city practically nothing.

In 2002, Public Advocate Gotbaum recommended that New York City accept the ABAWD waiver in her report *Stamping Out Hunger*, and has been advocating for this change ever since. Since that time, she has fought successfully to reduce the Food Stamp application from 16 to 4 pages, increase evening and weekend Food Stamp office hours for working New Yorkers, and install a community-based outreach program that enrolled 77,000 New Yorkers in the Food Stamp program.

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